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Lincoln City Hall (Old City Hall) (U.S. Post  
Office and Courthouse)  
916 "O" Street  
Lincoln  
Lancaster County  
Nebraska

HABS No. NE-17

P H O T O G R A P H S

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20240

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5-AMERICA'S CITY HALLS

A Joint Program of  
The American Institute of Architects  
The United States Conference of Mayors  
The United States Department of the Interior

Name: Original -- United States Post Office and Courthouse  
Secondary -- Lincoln City Hall; Old City Hall

Location: 916 "O" Street, Lincoln, Lancaster County, Nebraska

Present Owner: City of Lincoln, Nebraska, in care of the Mayor and City Council

Present Occupant: Vacant

Present Use: Vacant; in process of restoration/rehabilitation/stabilization

Significance:

Lincoln's Old City Hall is architecturally significant as a notable product of the "Grant era" and as an unusual fusion of Victorian Gothic and Second Empire elements, typifying in an important measure the manner in which Federal architecture was created in the nineteenth century. Historical significance is derived from the prominent stature given to early Lincoln by the Federal government when it constructed this edifice as a United States Post Office and Courthouse: the completed structure cost about \$200,000 -- a large Federal expenditure on a community with an 1875 population of only 7,000. The building is associated with an event that significantly contributed to the history of Nebraska, for between 1879-1906 it housed a U.S. Land Office at which over five million acres of land in the southern part of the state were claimed under the Homestead Act. The building is also rendered historical significance through its having been the first city hall of Lincoln and for housing the municipal government during a 62-year period that witnessed the population triple (43,973 in 1910; 149,518 in 1970). Significance is also derived from the building's associations with two prominent, 19th-century American architects: Alfred B. Mullett and William A. Potter.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History

1. Lincoln's Old City Hall, built originally as a United States Post Office and Courthouse, was constructed between 1874-79. These years are evinced by Lincoln newspapers (see John Q. Magie's "Early Newspaper References to City Hall," and "Notes on the History and Architecture of City Hall, Lincoln, Nebraska," Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1967) and by information in the annual Report of the Supervising Architect of the U.S. Treasury, 1874-79, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
2. Two architects are connected with the design of Lincoln's Old City Hall: Alfred B. Mullett and William A. Potter. Accounts in local newspapers and in the annual Report of the Supervising Architect of the U.S. Treasury, 1874-79, support their connections.
3. Limestone facing for the brick walls of Lincoln's Old City Hall was obtained from the Gwyer Quarries along the Platte River in Sarpy County, Nebraska.
4. Original Plans and Construction: Few exterior changes have occurred to the exterior of Lincoln's Old City Hall. The most important have been the conversion of several doors into windows, the installation of new roofing, and the removal of iron cresting from the roof's apex and the removal of some stone cornice brackets. Original plans for the building are assumed to be in the National Archives, Washington, D.C.; some of William A. Potter's drawings for the re-designing of the building accompany this report; also included are drawings by the Lincoln firm of Shaul and Assenmacher done in 1906-07 for the city hall conversion. (See article from The Trade Review, Lincoln, August 3, 1907.)
5. Alterations and Additions: Some main facade fenestral modifications and a good amount of interior alterations occurred in 1907 (see above). Numerous views, showing the building from the period of its excavation, are in the photograph collection of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

## B. Historical Context:

The "Old City Hall" of Lincoln, Nebraska, was not built as a municipal building, but as a United States Post Office and Courthouse. Its grounds include the south 85 feet of Block 43, Original Plat, City of Lincoln. A grassy space known as the Market Square in Lincoln's earliest days, Block 43 was conveyed to the United States Government by the City of Lincoln in 1873, with excavation for a Federal building beginning the following year. Due to several difficulties, including a temporary inability to secure suitable building materials and a change in architects and architectural design, construction did not begin in earnest until 1876. Exterior work continued until 1878 and full completion was finally realized in 1879.

The product served as a Federal government building until 1906, when a second United States Post Office and Courthouse was completed on the north-east section of Block 43. The 1870's building was sold to the City for \$50,000, "subject to the provision that when the City of Lincoln ceases to use the building and site . . . for municipal purposes the same shall revert to the possession and ownership of the United States government" (quit claim deed, Lancaster County, Nebraska, dated March 3, 1903). A \$12,000 remodeling was carried out and the building was occupied by municipal officials and employees in 1907.

Significantly, there had been no permanent city hall prior to 1907 -- the council meeting in various halls and offices before that time. The former Federal building was the seat of Lincoln's local government for 62 years, vacated in 1969 upon the completion of a new county-city facility. A United States Senate bill in the 91st Congress (September, 1970) sought to amend the quit claim deed provision requiring municipal use in order for the City to retain possession, but the bill did not pass beyond the Committee on Public Works.

Lincoln's Old City Hall was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on October 15, 1969 (a copy of the nomination is accompanies this report). This action appears to have convinced a number of people that the building substantially merited preservation. Amidst discussion of demolishing the structure, one official and a clerk did maintain an office in the building after its vacation so that the City could fulfill its obligation of keeping the place in municipal use. In the mid-1970's, a Lincoln architectural firm formulated plans to convert the vacant building into a museum, exhibition center, senior citizens center, and offices. To be joined with the second United States Post Office and Courthouse on the same block (vacant at that time following the occupation of a third Federal building in Lincoln), a bond issue which would have financed the project was turned down by voters in May, 1977, and again in November, 1977 (see pertinent pages from Barbaralee Diamonstein's Buildings Reborn: New Uses, Old Places, 1978).

Some preservation work was carried out on the Old City Hall in 1978, a second preservation phase is underway, and a third and final phase is being planned. Most likely, the building will house a visitors' center and city offices.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

## A. Description of Exterior

Built of brick and faced in a rubble ranged manner with Nebraska limestone, the Old City Hall of Lincoln, Nebraska, is a four-story, rectangular structure measuring 90 by 60 feet. There is a slightly projecting central bay on each side--the arrangement being strictly symmetrical--and the building is covered by a hip-on-mansard roof. Five interior chimneys pierce the hipped portion of the roof; punctuating the mansard on all sides are gabled dormers that flank the projecting center gabled bays. Salient openings are treated with trefoil-headed arches while the heads of other arches are pointed segmental. Continuous smooth stone banding unites all fenestration below the mansard roof which rests on a bracketed stone cornice. Above the main (south) facade's centered entrance is a nonfunctional stone balcony between the second and third floors. Important exterior changes have been limited to a lowering of the grade at front and rear entrances, conversion of two doors flanking the main entrance on the south into windows, removal of stone pinnacles atop the gabled bays, removal of some of the stone bracketing, and removal of iron cresting atop the hipped roof's ridge.

The building is presently vacant while undergoing a second phase of preservation work -- this one involving restoration, stabilization, and rehabilitation. The first phase, carried out in 1978, included exterior cleaning, roofing material replacement, and repair of fourth-floor windows.

The present project is being financed by a \$50,000 grant-in-aid from the United States Department of the Interior, matched by money from a local foundation and in-kind services from City of Lincoln personnel and members of the Junior League of Lincoln, Inc. As required, the work plans have been reviewed and determined as being in conformance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Preservation Projects.

Exterior work during the second phase includes the following: repair and painting of first, second, and third-story windows, including replacement of sash parts where necessary; removal of glass doors on the main (south) facade and replication of original ones; repair of rear doors; installation of an entrance and a handicap ramp on the west; and removal of paving and parking -- to be replaced by grass -- on the west.

Phase III, scheduled for 1983, will concentrate on interior and mechanical work and will involve the following: floor repair, stripping and re-installation of marble fittings, repair of interior plaster pilasters, installation of modern restrooms and the provision of modern electrical, heating, and air-conditioning systems.

## B. Description of Interior:

The exterior of Lincoln's Old City Hall has been extensively photographed, beginning with its excavation in 1874. The original interior, however, is virtually unrecorded; the best method of surmising its appearance is through examination of drawings done for the building's 1907 conversion from a Federal to a municipal facility.

Significant first-floor alterations that occurred during the 1907 work include the modification of two trefoil-arch-headed doors on the main (south) facade into windows and removal of stone steps that approached them, grade leveling at front and rear entrances with installation of vestibules, the creation of an octagonal rotunda with an iron structural system, installation of a cast-iron staircase along the north wall's center, relocation of an elevator to the immediate east of the staircase, conversion of chambers centered on the east and west into vaults, and addition of restrooms off mid-level staircase landings.

Other changes were made to the first floor in 1907 also: portions of the major public spaces were given marble wainscoting, and terrazzo and tile flooring was provided. The small tesserae used in the flooring of the main vestibule announce "CITY OF LINCOLN" past the entrance and form a Greek fret border in the flooring of the vestibules and rotunda. The 1907 renovation also included the addition of a heavy classical entablature in main spaces and the application of Roman Ionic pilasters of cast plaster to render further definition to the rotunda. A number of pilasters are in a poor state of repair but are soon to undergo restoration. Doorframes with pointed-segmental heads are intact throughout the first floor and a few sections of low, wooden dados survive.

The elevator is treated with elaborate metal grilles and the staircase of cast iron has Neo-Grec newels which correspond with Neo-Grec cast-iron columns in the rotunda space.

The staircase lobby of the second floor carries on the early-20th-century renovation elements. There is the Greek fret border formed by small tilework, a classical entablature of cast plaster and Roman Ionic pilasters on marble-sheathed bases, and terrazzo flooring. Beyond the stair lobby are partitions slated for removal.

In the northeast part of the second floor is the former United States courtroom -- later used as the City Council chamber. There is a wooden dado on three sides, and adorning the ceiling is an impressive pressed-metal covering treated with egg-and-dart banding, anthemion, fluted bands, coffered sections, and more. The west wall of the courtroom/council chamber has been compromised: two large arches have been filled in but their molded heads are clearly discernable.

Across the front of the second floor are small rooms originally used as judges' chambers. What became the Register of Deeds vault is centered along the west wall, directly above a first-floor vault. Simple molded cornices are in some second-floor spaces.

Centered on the westernmost part of the third and fourth floors are vaults, located directly above similar spaces on the first and second floors. These were part of the 1907 work. There is a raised floor in the third story's eastern half to accomodate the high ceiling of the courtroom/council chamber below.

The fourth floor possesses an abundant series of arches whose wooden frames are mostly intact. Some sections of wooden dados have been retained and there is a coved ceiling around this floor's perimeter to accomodate dormer windows. The stair lobby of this floor receives significant illumination from a borrow-light at its eastern end.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

## C. Site:

Lincoln's Old City Hall occupies a centered position in the southern 85 feet of Block 43 in the Original Plat of Lincoln. Slightly off-center to the north (and within the same block) is the second building in the City erected by the United States Government. The latter, a Beaux-Arts design, now houses local governmental offices. A paved parking lot is to the east of Old City Hall, and the property to the west was paved but is being returned to a grassy space. In the southwest corner of the block is the "Old Comfort Station," a one-story, stone restroom facility constructed about 1905.

The Hall fronts "O" Street, the main thoroughfare of Lincoln. It faces south and is three blocks west of the intersection of 13th and "O" Streets -- the recognized heart of Lincoln's downtown. Buildings in the vicinity span a variety of heights and architectural styles. On each neighboring block to the east and west is a medium-sized hotel of somewhat recent construction, and to the southeast are two taller yet older office buildings.



PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Architectural Drawings: Accompanying this report are two pages of drawings by William A. Potter, second Supervising Architect of the U.S. Treasury assigned to the Federal Post Office and Courthouse in Lincoln, Nebraska. Also being sent are drawings by Shaul and Assenmacher, done for the building's 1906-07 conversion into Lincoln's City Hall.

B. Early Views: Accompanying this report are two historic views in photographic form of Lincoln's Old City Hall. Both photographs are fully and properly labeled.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

C. Bibliography

Diamonstein, Barbaralee. Buildings Reborn: New Uses, Old Places. New York: Harper and Row, 1978.

Landau, Sarah Bradford. Edward T. and William A. Potter: American Victorian Architects. New York: Garland Publishing Co., 1979 (originally presented as author's doctoral dissertation, New York University, 1978).

\* Magie, John Q. "Early Newspaper References to City Hall (Former Post Office at Lincoln, Nebraska)". Unpublished paper in possession of Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, 1967.

\* \_\_\_\_\_ "Notes on the History and Architecture of City Hall, Lincoln, Nebraska". Unpublished paper in possession of Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, 1967.

National Register of Historic Places Inventory -- Nomination Form. Washington, D.C. : U.S. Department of the Interior, 1969.

D. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated:

Annual Reports submitted by the Supervising Architect of the U.S. Treasury, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

\* E. Supplemental material is enclosed.

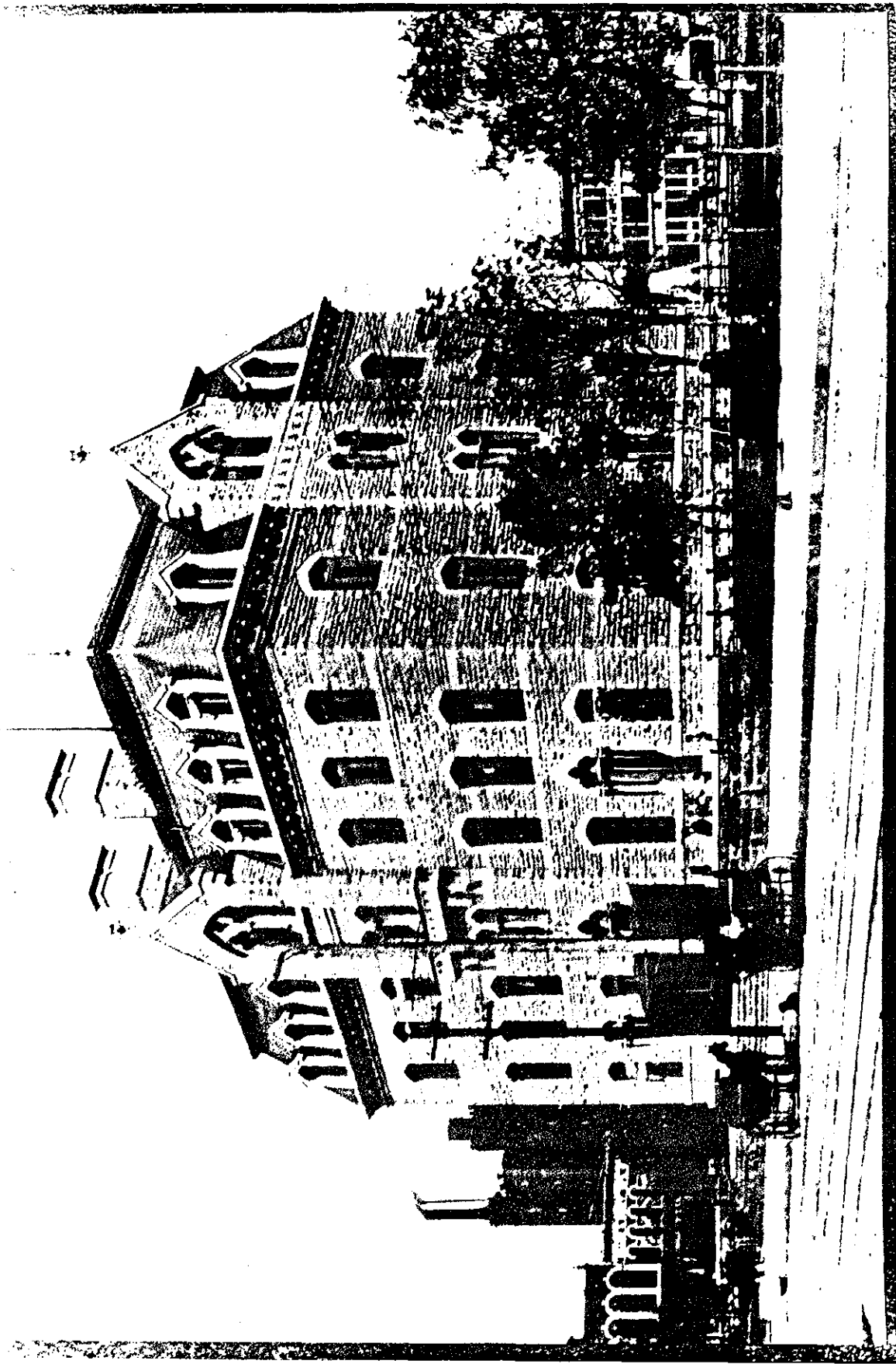
Daniel Kidd, Planner II  
Lincoln City-Lancaster County Planning Department  
August 26, 1981

\*Included in field records for Lincoln City Hall

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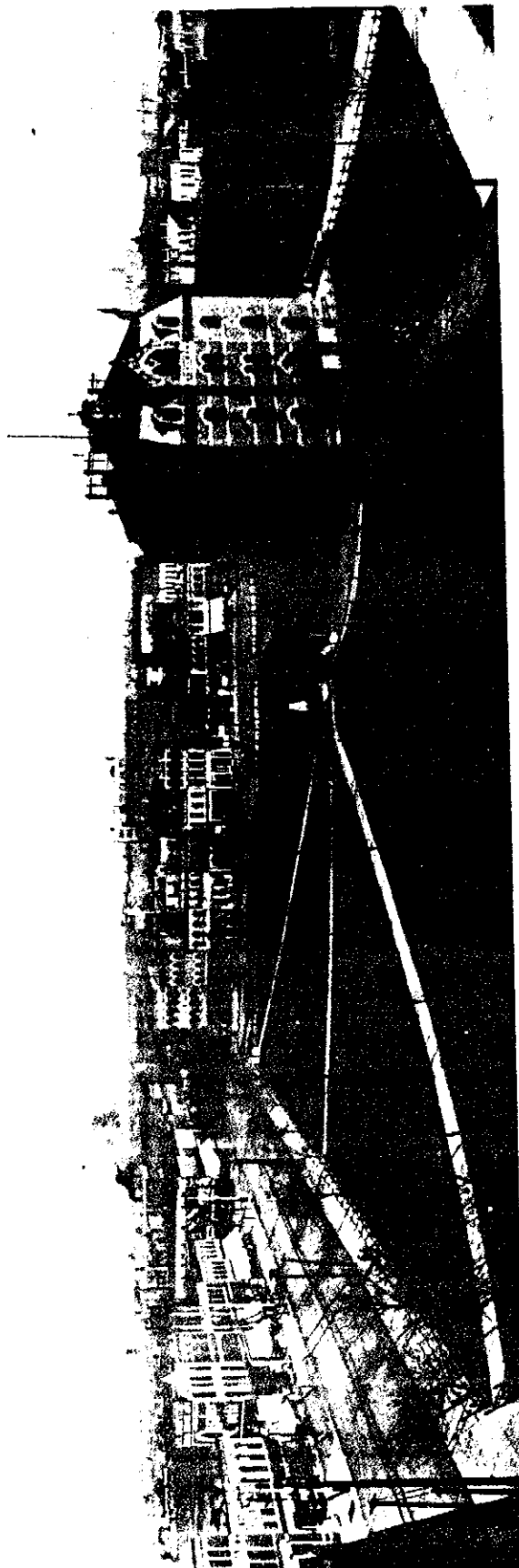
Photograph captioned "Post Office, L. Lincoln,  
Nebraska. 1903 From Mrs. Victor's book."

Photograph owned by Nebraska State  
Historical Society



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Government Square showing the Post Office  
Building (later to become City Hall). n.d.

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Society